

# OBITUARY

## R. Thomas Lange, 1936–2012



R. Thomas Lange died at the age of seventy-six on November 14, 2012, and the Medical Library Association lost an innovative leader of the profession. He was a medical librarian who could honestly say that his career was entirely focused on developing academic health sciences libraries. After graduating with a master's of library science from Peabody College in 1970, he was hired to develop the new health sciences library facility at the Southern College of Optometry in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1973, he moved to Mobile, Alabama, to become the first director of the University of South Alabama College of Medicine (USACOM) Biomedical Library. The USACOM was just being established, and Tom set up the library on half of the third floor of the university library building. It was separated from the other library by chicken wire and initially functioned with bound journals categorized in piles on the floor and an *Abridged Index Medicus* accessed by Teletypewriter Exchange Service (AIM-TWX) in a closet that connected the library to MEDLINE at the National Library of Medicine (NLM).

During his brief two-and-a-half-year tenure at USACOM, he recognized the value of computers in organizing medical knowledge. One of the first large pieces of equipment he acquired was a key punch machine, used initially to create a journals holdings list for the library. However, as there were several medical libraries in Mobile that participated in an active interlibrary loan consortium, he proposed and created a union list of medical periodicals for the area.

In 1975, Tom moved to the University of South Carolina (USC) and was the school's first full-time faculty member and the first library director at their nascent School of Medicine, which was located on the campus of the Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital in Columbia. The library spent its first year in a storefront across the street. After a year, it moved to the main university campus to relocate in a former law library facility, with the ambiance of a traditional, oak furniture-filled library from the 1920s. The traditional looks were deceiving as the library's work room contained a state-of-the-art key punch machine that was used initially to create the South Carolina Union List of Medical Periodicals and eventually the South Eastern Medical Periodicals Union List (SEMPUL), the third largest in the country and one of the first union lists that provided the foundation for NLM's SERHOLD, the basis for DOCLINE routing of interlibrary loans.

Tom worked with the architects to design a new, technology-intensive, four-story library building on the VA campus, and a few years after moving the library to the main USC campus, he oversaw the move of the library into new, modern facilities with computer systems that could support full library automation. The USC School of Medicine Library under Tom's leadership saw a number of firsts. It was the first medical library in the country to electronically catalog its first book and the first library in the state to have an online catalog. It had the first VAX installation of LIS, the library information system created by the Georgetown University School of Medicine Library. It continued to produce serials union lists, moving from key punch cards, to Panvalet (an online batch processing system), to interactive terminals connected to the university's VAX clusters and mainframes, and finally to desktop computers.

Tom was one of the profession's earliest proponents of automation in academic health sciences libraries, and because of his knowledge and passion, he was eventually appointed as an assistant dean in the USC School of Medicine and put in charge of not just the library, but also all telecommunications services and the school's data center (the medical school's computer center). As the school grew, so did his responsibilities. He oversaw the development of the networking system that established connectivity initially for all the basic science departments and eventually for the clinical campus, with over 600 workstations. Because he understood that academic health sciences libraries needed to serve unaffiliated health care providers and could not operate in isolation, he was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the South Carolina Health Information Network, linking all providers in the state to the state's two academic medical libraries.

Tom was active in the profession, serving on several Medical Library Association committees and special interest group and section committees. He hosted the annual meetings of the Southern Chapter in Columbia in 1977 and 1992 and served as its section chair in 1976–1977. He was one of the founding members of the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL). Tom retired from USC in 1999 to pursue his passion for travel and the arts.

Tom was a very private person, and he shared his exceptional creativity with only a few others. He pursued a master of arts degree in media arts at USC and created several films, including one called *Death in the Library* about books devouring a librarian. He was the author of numerous short stories that were very pointed allegories. Perhaps one of the most poignant stories, "The Last Leaf," was a metaphor for his life: the story of a leaf challenging the impossible

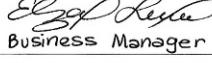
until finally deciding to seek a new life. Tom's career as director of three academic health sciences libraries that were in the process of being developed or reorganized gave him the opportunities to both

face and overcome the impossible in providing health information in innovative new modalities.

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